THE PHENOMENON OF ENGRAVED SLATE

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It has long been known among experienced collectors that broken or damaged slate artifacts were often salvaged and re-used. This salvage not only took the form of regrinding and re-shaping the damaged areas to restore the balance and symmetry, but also of re-drilling new holes where necessary.

Salvage of damaged or broken pieces often includes a puzzling treatment which has nothing to do with the artifact's function — and that is the addition of tally marking and or engraving — generally known under the rubric "engraved slate."

Tally Marking and Engraving

Tally marking probably began in the Middle Archaic period for there are rare examples of bannerstones or atlatl weights with tally marks or even edge notching from that early time. Such treatments, however rare, demonstrate that tally marking was practiced some 5,000 to 7,000 years ago and was probably done to denote the fact that the piece had been broken or damaged.

Tally marking and engraving began in earnest in the Late Archaic Glacial Kame period. At this time large numbers of formally designed gorgets appear as a major part of a culture. On rare Glacial Kame gorgets tally marking and engraving is obviously part of the original overall design and is not a sign of damage. These gorgets are usually relatively easy to identify since they show no evidence of breakage and the tally marking appears to harmonize with other general engraving. Thus, it is apparent that in not every instance is tally marking and engraving associated with, or suggestive of, breakage or damage, especially in the Glacial Kame pieces.

But to confuse the issue, tally marking and engraving was also done to numerous damaged or broken Glacial Kame slate, hardstone, and shell gorgets on which much of the damage was repaired — it is a common occurrence. In fact it is so prevalent that prehistorically damaged pieces without this treatment are unusual. It is also interesting to note that, after being broken and salvaged, these gorgets show wear-evidence of being used for a long time.

I have omitted the word pendant when referring to Glacial Kame since, so far as I know, not a single slate pendant with an unquestionable provenience has ever been recorded for this culture.

Many examples of tally marking and engraving can be seen on pendants and gorgets from cultures after Glacial Kame. Red Ocher, Adena, Hopewell, Intrusive Mound and Fort Ancient people all continued the practice to one extent or another. Even some objects from as late as the Early Historic period were engraved.

In all cultures after the Middle Archaic period, instances of tally marking may consist of no more than two or three seemingly random and slight right angle cuts in the edge of an artifact. But it also includes those on which all edges were deeply tallied.

In extremely rare cases after the Glacial Kame period it appears that tally marking was done to some types of undamaged pieces as part of a final decoration. For example, there are a few Hopewell shovel pendants that have tally marks which seem to be part of the original design. In some instances there is a single group of three or four tally marks apparently placed at random on the squared end or even the base of this artifact. On others there may be several sets of these nonsymmetrically placed marks. In most instances it is difficult to see where there has been any damage at all to these tally marked pieces.

Trapezoidal pendants and rectangular pendants are often tally marked — seemingly done as part of the original design. Fine, evenly spaced marks may decorate all edges and in unique instances they can be set in pairs. Strangely, on this artifact type, the base of the narrow end near the suspension hole is often tallied or engraved or may even have heavy and nonsymmetric notch-like tallies.

Despite these types, in general, tally marking indicates that somewhere in the life of the pendant or gorget there has been damage.

The Purpose of Tally Marking

No one really knows why pieces were tally marked — but the subject doesn't lack for speculation and theory. Over the years I have heard that these tallies kept track of animals killed, enemy slain, one's age, calendrical events such as days of the week or the month, years since such and such, or almost anything that could be counted. I have heard of collectors spending hours counting tally marks (sometimes a difficult feat) to see if their numbers coincide with some numerical record such as days, months, or years of the calendar. Although it is possible that these strange marks may have had some time-marking validity (which I don't believe), attempting to relate them to our Gregorian calendar is silly since the prehistoric Indians did not know what a European calendar was. I was once told that a tally marked piece was a mnemonic device — (i.e. something that reminded one of dates, years, numbers, annual events, moonrise, sunrise, etc.) — but that, I believe, is more than aboriginal people were capable of.

Although we can theorize and postulate ad infiniturn about these marks, I believe that all of them were no more than decorations — done to show that the piece had been damaged.

As far as counting and arithmetic are concerned, most prehistoric people had little knowledge of such things. In many primitive cultures, after counting to ten — the number of fingers — there were no specific numbers. More than ten was just "many." And to complicate matters, not all prehistoric cultures, that had the ability to count, used a system of tens. For example, one nearly extinct group of aborigines in India used a counting system of alternating twelves, twenties, and twelves when numbering in sequence. And if you believe that is strange, look at your own clock dial which divides time up in twelves — or your yardstick which does the same.

Engraving

Engraving, is often puzzling, enigmatic, challenging, bizarre, sometimes next to impossible to see with the naked eye, and in nearly every instance, incomprehensible and totally undecipherable. Engraving and tally marking are usually considered as part of the same treatment but there are differences. Seldom does engraving portray anything we can recognize. The vast majority of it consists of tic-tac-toe-like designs or crosshatching. Much of it is little more than a seemingly unrelated series of random lines.

One of the interesting aspects of treatment of salvaged pieces is that on some examples one can see re-drilling of suspension holes, tally marking, partially drilled holes, notching, and engraving—all the components of this arcane practice.

The most puzzling part of engraving is that much of it was so lightly inscribed that it is nearly impossible to see without a magnifier. Thus, if the aboriginal owner who engraved the piece was attempting to convey a message to others, he failed since it could not be seen at all more than a few inches away. Thus, no one knew it was engraved except the owner. Perhaps the fact that he or she knew the engraving was there was sufficient — and as long as the owner knew it was engraved, that was all that was required.

Occasionally one sees what I call “dammit” engraving. It appears to be little more than a quick application of hurriedly applied circular or zig-zag lines or just plain scratches. There is no symmetry or regularity and seems to have been done quickly — probably in frustration from breaking the piece.

Realistic Engraving

There are unusual examples on which engraving portrays such things as animals, humans, birds, or other recognizable motifs — but they are extremely unusual. Most of these rare pieces were more often than not made on broken artifacts. There are also realistic examples which have half of the engraving on one face and the other half on the opposite side, the piece theoretically having to be split into two pieces to see the entire portrayal.

Realistic engravings, I believe, are as close as aboriginal people ever came to developing any kind of graphic communication. Such presentations appear to be trying to relate, by picture, a story or concept which required more than words to convey. Unfortunately, there are so few of these portrayals that it is nearly useless to try and codify them.

One example is the Schisler tablet. It was originally collected by Dr. Stanley Copeland of Columbus, Ohio, from the Schisler site, a large Fort Ancient site north of Portsmouth, Ohio, in Scioto County. Portrayed on a broken gorget or pendant by lightly incised lines is what is called a Corn Dancer on one face and a bird on the other. This piece is unique to our state. Similar engraving on shell are rare but well known from many Mississippian Southern Cult sites from Etowah, Georgia, to the Spiro Mound in Oklahoma. The Southern Cult is the final florescence of the last of North America's late prehistoric and early historic cultures. Even though the Southern Cult and Ohio Fort Ancient may have been related in time, there were few exchanges of artifacts or ideas between the two cultures. Thus, the presence of an engraving of a Southern Cult Corn Dancer on an Ohio Fort Ancient site is highly extraordinary.

Was this engraving made by a Fort Ancient individual who had visited a Southern Cult site and wanted to show the folks back home what he had seen in Georgia? Or was this a Southern Cult emissary visiting the Fort Ancient people in Ohio who wanted to show these backward Ohio people what a real cult figure looked like? The speculation is endless but how this unique piece got to Ohio would be a revelation in its own.

Another realistic engraving is the Johnson tablet. Found by surface hunter Clark Johnson near Bourneville in Ross County, it is the portrayal of what I interpret to be a wolf. The lines are well defined and heavily cut into what appears to be a broken gorget or pendant. The style is more curvilinear than most engravings and is quite similar to some Hopewell bone carvings. Oddly, in one corner of this extraordinary piece is a faint and lightly sketched Southern Cult death's head obviously done by a different etcher and probably at a later time. The back of this unique piece has a series of decorative triangular designs.

Redrilling

Part of the tally marking-engraving treatment is the redrilling of new suspension holes and of repair holes. In many instances when a piece was broken, adjacent repair holes were drilled to tie the piece back together. Such repair is not uncommon, especially on winged bannerstones. Broken bar gorgets, for example, often have the ends of the broken portions ground smooth and repair holes or a new symmetrically placed suspension hole drilled. In many instances, tally marks or engraving were added to these gorgets.

Many pendants show evidence of redrilling suspension holes. In numerous instances, if the artifact broke through one of the suspension holes the remains of the hole can be seen on the repaired edge of the piece. A great many newly drilled holes are apparent from their lack of wear and the fact that they don't match the original hole or holes.

Engraving On Non-formal Artifacts

In addition to the preceding instances of engraving, tally marking on artifacts, broken or otherwise, there is a class of pieces which appear to be no more than odd or unusual non-artifact rocks which were engraved. Technically, after these anomalous stone pieces were engraved they became artifacts. Many of these objects are little more than eye-catching stones that were polished by glacial action — stones which we might pick up and took at while surface hunting — we've all done it. Apparently aboriginal people also had a fascination of unusual stones and engraved them.

But these examples are very unusual. I once saw a black basaltic stone about the size of a lemon — smoothed and polished from being rolled around in its glacial transport from Canada — which had no peck or grinding marks anywhere — but which was totally engraved by a series or ribbon-like engravings. Perhaps many of these pieces we pick up in the field and toss away as not an artifact deserve closer inspection.

Summary

The practice of engraving and tally marking was widely used by many prehistoric cultures and lasted into the historic period. Usually appearing on damaged pendants and gorgets, it provides an insight, however poorly understood, into the minds and customs of prehistoric people. It is such a complex subject that only the essentials of this fascinating cultural trait have been touched on here.

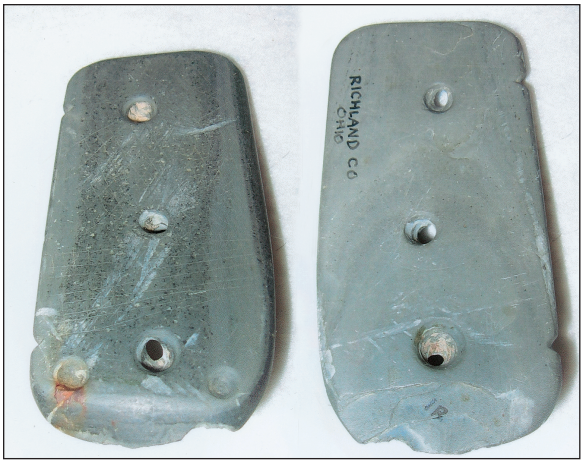

Figure A. (Converse) A salvaged and repaired slate gorget from Richland County. Two of the repair holes did not pierce the tablet. Difficult to see is a series of engraved lines in a tic-tac-toe design. A saw line and a set of side notches are evident.

Figure B. (Converse) An engraved slate bar found on the Zimmerman Farm in Hardin County, Ohio. Shown in obverse and reverse, the engraving is unique.

Figure 1 (Converse) Group of engraved pieces and one re-drilled piece. Most engravings consist of criss-cross or tic-tac-toe designs.

Figure 2 (Converse) Glacial gorget or red banded slate. The remnants of two repair holes can be seen at the bottom. Between the bottom and the lower hole is a cross-hatched engraving. Each side of the upper portion is tally-marked.

Figure 3 (Converse) Red slate shovel pendant. Top has a series of small tally-marks. Many shovel pendants have small groups of tally-marks yet show no evidence of damage.

Figure 4 (Converse) Two trapezoidal pendants. Pendant on left shows no signs of damage but has two turkeys carved on its face. The reverse side has an engraved turkey and a turtle. Engraving with realistic portrayals are rare. Seldom is engraving so deeply incised as is seen in this rare pendant. On the right is a salvaged red slate pendant. Traces of the original hole can be seen in the upper end. The angular design is the familiar Fort Ancient or Mississippian depiction of the "weeping eye." The obverse of this pendant has the same design. If both sides of the pendant could be joined it would show the entire weeping eye theme on shell gorgets.

Figure 5 (Converse) A trapezoidal pendant from Seneca County. It is decorated with a series of precise tiny tally-marks. There is no damage to the pendant and the tally-marks are part of the original design.

Figure 6 (Converse) A rare two-hole Glacial Kame gorget of yellow quartzite with inclusions. The broken portion prompted the owner to make a series of deep tally-marks around the entire circumference except at the broken part.

Figure 8 (Converse) Two trapezoidal pendants. Pendant on left has sets of two tally marks on left side. Pendant on right was lightly engraved.

Figure 7 (Converse) Two Glacial Kame pieces from the Zimmerman Kame in Hardin County. Top gorget is engraved in bas-relief — an exceptionally rare trait. The bottom is a broken tubular pipe with punctates and two snakes.

Figure 9 (Converse) A damaged Glacial Kame gorget. Damaged edges are all marked with tally marks.

Figure 10 (Converse) One of the rarest engravings in Ohio is this piece from Ross County. It is what has been interpreted as a Hopewell engraving of a wolf. The back of the piece has diagonal cross-hatching lines. Oddly — and invisible in the photo — is a Southern Cult deaths-head lightly engraved in the upper right hand corner.

Figure 11 (Converse) A broken and salvaged shovel pendant. Hole at the bottom is the repair hole. Piece is covered with engraved diagonal criss-cross lines.

Figure 12 (Converse) Even in historic times engraving was used. These two catlinite pipes are engraved— one with a small leaf-like design and the other with random lines.